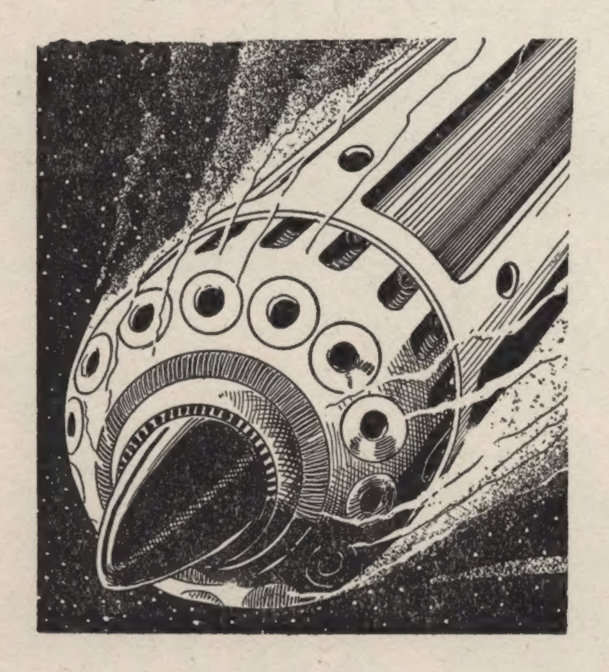
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The Voice Commands

By Dennis Clive



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The Voice Commands

By Dennis Clive

Release all weapons on all cities!



1960...1970...1980...The parade of endless years of insufferable carnage. Nation against nation.

1981. A cold inhuman peace brooded over the earth...

Far out on the Atlantic a solitary synthetic rock still stood, its mighty construction unharmed by the attempts of bombers to destroy it. Warders and criminals alike still lived, had forgotten anything existed save their own bitter little world. Deep down in the dungeons men still stirred, half starved, only given food when a provision ship happened to crash against the rocks and spewed forth its valued cargo.

Yes, deep down in the dungeons two men especially still lived, kept alive by the fire of vengeance. Twenty years of hardship and pent hatred was carved into their bearded faces. Their eyes were smoldering pools as they stared at the warder standing in the open doorway of their cell.

Open! Not for the usual exercise round the gaunt yard—but *wide* open! And that was not all...The guard was grinning, almost vacantly, his usually stonelike countenance split from ear to ear. His keys jangled in his hand.

"Well?" asked Moss' deep, bitter voice at length.

"You can go," the man chuckled. "We can all go. No sense in stopping here now a rowing boat's been thrown up from a wrecked ship. Might as well go out and play..."

"Play?" repeated the voice of Arthur Cassell. He got slowly to his feet. His hair and beard were still blond. "Did you say —*play*?"

"Sure!" The guard grinned again, then tossed his keys away. "We're all free. Your cell was the last one; no use for the keys anymore. Let's go!" He turned away whistling.

The two men stared at each other stupidly. Then suddenly Moss started to laugh until the tears ran down his bearded cheeks.

"Play!" he screamed, pounding the wall. "My God—play! After twenty years of this he—

"Take it easy, Hart," Cassell snapped, gripping his friend's rag-covered arms. "Don't go off half-cocked! This is a moracle all right, and we're going to take advantage of it. Something screwy about it all the same. Come on."

Together they limped out of the cell into the gloomy corridor. Other prisoners, bearded and melancholy, glanced at them but said nothing. In silence they all trooped upwards to the open reaches of the prison yard, and so finally out onto the wild, spume-swept ridge that gave access to the sea.

The prisoners shivered a little in the cold, bracing blast, did their best to get into what sunshine there was. Cassell and Moss kept together, and at last Moss said:

"Take a look at that! They're nuts, I think."

Cassell did not answer. Certainly something was wrong with the guards. They were singing songs — and incredible though it was, those songs were old-fashioned nursery rhymes! As they sang, they walked skippingly towards the steps leading down the cliff face. The grim-faced prisoners followed, stared down the dizzying stretch at the rowboat anchored far below.

"Certainly act as though they're crazy," Cassell admitted at last, frowning. Then he stared down at the boat. "Thousand miles in that, huh? Well, I guess it's better than stopping here...Near as I can figure it, it's summer time, so maybe we'll make it."

He started down the steps with Moss behind him, and presently they had joined the others — as bewildered as they were by their incredible good fortune. But most baffling of all was the asinine behavior of the warders — men who had been cruelty itself now as cheerful and considerate as it was possible to be. They seemed to take an actual delight in provinig that the boat had some food and water enough to see them all through, if they shared alike...

The prisoners glanced at each other and gave it up. Then rowing began. Little by little the boat pulled away from that forbidding pile. The guards still whistled and laughed among themselves; the prisoners pulled on their oars, ther faces set and hard within their beards, their exposed skin as white as a fish's belly.

Once or twice Cassell gazed at the sky and frowned. There was something queer about it. It was a paler blue — and he could see one or two stars despite the sunlight. He wondered if his eyesight was defective from so much enforced gloom.

"No, it *is* paler, and there *are* one or two stars," Moss confirmed, as the matter was put to him. "Can't quite figure it out. . . ." He paused in his rowing and stared around on the heaving waste of waters. "Odd there are no ships around," he muttered. "Wonder if the war ended, or if they're still at it?"

Nobody attempted to answer his question, the guards least of all. . . .

More rowing. Endless rowing. Occasional sleep, occasional food. On and on, over the heaving deep. . . .

CHAPTER II

A City in Ruins

NEITHER Cassell nor Moss remembered how many days and nights elapsed on the ocean. At times squalls hit them, but in the main, the weather was warm and sunny. Food, carefully rationed, lasted out — and the reckless generosity of the guards was a thing of wonder....

Then at last there hove from out of the blurred horizon that line they all longed to see — the coastline of America, growing slowly more distinct as the minutes passed.

Rowing went on harder than ever, with the desperation that only returning exiles can command. But the more they rowed the more puzzled they become.... The coastline became clearer.

"That isn't America!" breathed Moss at last, staring under his shading hand. "Or is it? England perhaps? No — not England..." He broke off, mystified. The guards too had ceased their singing and were frowning in perplexity.

"We ought to see the coastline of New York, Philadelphia, or Boston if we've followed the route correctly," Cassell muttered. "And I guess we have. But —"

Silence again. More slap of the oars in water; then at length the coastline was quite close. It was America, yes, but the exiles stared now in dazed silence at where New York should have been. But instead of the towers of Manhattan were skeleton buildings, the shattered shells of once mighty edifices, fallen into utter disuse! The harbors were choked with rusting seacraft. Some of the vessels were half broken up in the mud. One giant transatlantic liner was a mass of barnacles and rust, a rag of a flag flapping in the breeze.

The moment they came within jumping distance of a deserted jetty, neither Cassell nor Moss waited for the others. They leapt out of the boat, swam the intervening few feet of water, and finally climbed to the jetty top, waved their arms to the little boatload as it continued its journey to the actual shore.

"Empty... Shattered!" whispered Moss in an awed voice.

Stupefied, they stared around them, at the smokeless remains of chimneys, the boulder-strewn streets, the grass crawling up the buildings, the collapsed subways, the twisted elevated...

Without a word, they started to walk slowly forward.

Beyond the slightest doubt, the old New York had gone. In fact, nearly all traces of civilization itself had disappeared. Everywhere the two moved were enormous craters, presumably from bombs, and tumbled masonry...

Then, turning a corner, they came upon something totally unexpected... Right in the middle of a square—its actual name and location forgotten—were people—men and women in makeshift clothes. Some of the men were heavily bearded with crudely-cropped hair; the women's hair hung to their waists. Savages, apparently—and yet they were toiling upon a massive mechanical device of almost unbelievable complexity, whilst near to them was a one-time factory hastily restored, from the interior of which came the steady clangor of industry.

"War survivors; children of those who fought, perhaps," Moss said thoughtfully. "Can't be anything else..."

"But look what they're building!" Cassell cried, pointing. "It looks to me like a projector of some sort... Guess we'd better look into this."

HE STRODE forward and touched one of the men on the arm as he turned to head towards the factory. Immediately he looked around, revealed a fresh, youthful face with honest blue eyes. A downy incipient stubble furred his chin and upper lip. For a moment he seemed a little surprised at the sight of the two bearded men in front of him—then he gave a broad, welcoming smile.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Come to play with us?"

"Huh?" Cassel said amazedly; then the memory of the guard's words on Atlantic Island came back to him. He gave a puzzled frown and shook his head.

"No; we're not playing. What's that you're building there?"

"Oh, that? Nothing much. We're just building because we want to, that's all. Might as well. We get tired of just playing, you know."

"Yeah; I suppose so." Cassell scratched his matted head and the man turned away, went with a walk that was very close to a trip, towards the factory.

"They're nuts!" Moss said flatly, clenching his fists. "They start on building a machine so complex we can't understand it, and say they do it as a relief from playing... Art, there's something mighty screwy going on around here!"

They stood watching the machine-builders for a while. The whole thing was a profound paradox—men and women, sing-

ing with childish glee, laughing with each other, as they constructed an instrument complicated enough to turn a trained engineer gray with worry... Where was the reason in that? And, now that the two came to notice it, some of the women had daisy chains around their hair; and the men argued with each other at intervals like schoolboys over a box of candies. They were childish—utterly childish!

Baffled, the two turned at last and stared in at the door of the collosal factory. It was working at full speed. Blast furnaces were in action; overhead belts were slapping on their flywheels—but again the vast industry of the place was produced by men and women with the bodies of adults and the manner of children. They skipped everywhere, laughed and played as they worked.

"Perhaps," Moss said slowly, tugging at his beard, "they've gone simple-minded after the awful horror of the war?"

Cassell shook his blond head. "Simple, nothing. They would have horror in their eyes, tragedy stamped indelibly in their faces—like refugees. There's none of that. They're happy—gloriously, beautifully happy! Nor do they seem to realize what they're really doing. All this is so much fun to them—and yet what they do is *accurate*! That's what gets me... Gosh, what a homecoming!"

Dazed, they turned away, began to wander at random. Time and again they came across the groups of people building machinery, all of it extremely complicated and accompanied by the inevitable nearby factory. And through it all one factor stood out—the machines were definitely strange and terrible engines of war! Cassell could recognize that much with his scientific knowledge; so could Moss, to a lesser degree. Children were building engines of war, when they ought to be sickened by the very motion of the idea!

They had their habitations too, these happy, enigmatic folks. They used roughly-constructed tents. In every direction were communities of them—but, although the people knew how to build machines, their ideas on tents were appalling. Not one of them was properly erected, and the conditions inside them were close to pandemonium.

"But why tents when they could live in the ruins of one of these huge department stores?" Moss demanded, waving his arm to the rearing buildings around them—shattered at the tops, but still serviceable below. They'd get much better protection from the night or the chance of storms... Maybe with it being summer, though, they're not concerned."

Cassell did not answer. He was staring down over the wilderness of ramshackle dwellings reaching right down in the still harbor waters. Men and women moved in and out, cooking over crude wood fires. Why wood fires, with all the forces of an electric factory at their disposal?

"Funny thing," he said at last, "there isn't a real child in sight! The adults are the children instead..." Again he brooded over the strange scene, glanced up at the pale sky with its faint smattering of stars; then at last he shook himself. "I guess that for the moment we can't do better than have some of their food—play with them, as they term it. Then we'll hunt up a piece of glass or something and take this fungus off our faces. I feel like Santa Claus... Come on."

They turned, strolled through the hot afternoon sunshine, gazing around on the ruins as they went...

CHAPTER III

The Voice

THE people raised no objection as the two invited themselves. They were accepted as friends without question, were given food—which analysis showed to be canned stuff evidently taken from what provisions the city still had left—and drink. Usually it was just hot water, sometimes flavored with an extract when one was lucky enough to find it.

For several days both men made no attempt to solve the mystery. They shaved with broken bottle, cut their hair, exposed themselves by longer degrees to the sunshine, made makeshift clothes. By the time they were finished, they were fairly recognizable, save for those grim lines of twenty imprisoned years chisseled forever in their faces.

The childlike manner of the people never altered. They slept too with the blissful innocence of children. Sometimes, they gamboled about as no adult ever would, then they returned in droves to their machine building.

The more Cassell and Moss looked into the matter, the more baffled they got. There were infinite varieties of machinies in all parts of the ruined city. In one quarter there were thousands upon thousands of small shells, obviously loaded with explosives infinitely more powerful than anything the intervening war had created.

"But where the hell do they get the knowledge from?" Moss yelled at last in utter exasperation, as he and Cassell stood in

the evening light gazing down on this latest revelation. "Why are they doing it anyway? They've no more intention of starting a war than a bunch of kids on a Sunday school picnic... Listen, Art, are we batty or are they? Maybe that twenty years on the island did something to us, eh?"

"No," Cassell answered quietly; "that twenty years did something to these people. Consider the facts. — They perform these masterpieces of engineering, yet they don't know the first thing about radio. They are children in mind, a fact which is proven by there being no genuine children. Though, physically, these folks are quite capable of marrying and producing children, they don't. And why? Because, as in children, the sexual urge isn't there."

An amazed light spread over Moss' rugged face. "Lord, you're right! I never thought of that!"

"Of course I'm right. We don't know how long that war lasted, but we do know that it left behind a race of people who are childlike in the ordinary way, yet gifted with a peculiar detached genius. Either they are deliberately planning a war on something or somebody, or else they are being *ordered* to do it..."

"Ordered? By what?"

Cassell shrugged, his eyes perplexed. "Search me! Point is, are other countries in the world similarly affected? Are the British, the Germans, the Russians and the French all doing the same thing? How to find out? Set to work to build an airplane, or else patch up one left from the war. Radio's no use. We could build a receiver easily enough, but I doubt if anybody would be transmitting. So our first job is to get an airplane."

"Might mention in to the young chap we first spoke to," Moss said. "Seems to have stuck to us all along. Maybe he'd like to build us one for fun," he finished, grinning.

But his jest met with a surprising response. The young man, when they had singled him out for questioning from the city workers, no sooner heard their suggestion than he led the way to a quarter of the city they had so far not explored. To their amazement they beheld literally square miles of oval objects glittering in the sunshine, some of them in the process of having machinery loaded into them.

"By all the saints, space-travel!" Moss gasped. He clutched at his friend's arm. "Space-travel, man! We certainly had not mastered that when we got shoved on the island."

"No." Cassell's blue eyes narrowed in sudden thought. "So,

the machines we see being built everywhere are for final inclusion in these ships," he muttered. "I suppose they *are* space-ships?" He glanced at the young man quickly.

"Travel anywhere," he answered, smiling. "Out into space, across the earth. Use atomic force recoil rockets."

"Atomic force too," Cassell muttered; then aloud, "You can control these things? Make them fly?"

"Sure. All of us can. We play games with them."

"We'll skip the games. Could you take my friend and I around the world and back here?"

THE young man nodded, then glanced at the sun. "Sunset in two hours," he mused. "We can be back by then...Come along in." He gave another smile and led the way, whistling, to the airlock of the nearest machine.

"Around the world in two hours?" Moss breathed, as they marched after him. "Gosh! That's traveling, huh?"

Cassell nodded, but made no observations. He seemed to be thinking. His frown deepened as he and Moss beheld the perfect interior of the space-machinie. It was replete to the last detail. Every instrument was flawlessly made; the seats were perfectly fashioned. There was not a piece of bad workmanship anywhere.

And it hal all been made by childish men and women who cooked tinned meats into stews over wood fires and lived in broken-down tents! Moss gave it up and shook his bullet head, but Cassell stroked his chin. Once he glanced through the window at the curiously pale blue sky with its sparse stars, pondered again; then finally he gave himself up to watching as the man closed the airlock and settled himself before the control-board.

The machine answered with perfect ease, lifted with hardly any sensation of motion, curved high over the ruined metropolis and then headed out towards the gleaming ocean. Far below, men and women waved their hands cheerily; some of them threw flowers into the air —

Then New York was far behind as the incredibly fast machine tore with smooth rhythm out over the Atlantic. In a matter of minutes, as it seemed, Atlantic Island loomed up. Moss gave a grim smile as the rock began to retreat behind them, but Cassell stared after it until it was out of sight, debating something deep within his mind...

It seemed no time before England was reached. Without the necessity of landing, it was perfectly obvious that the condi-

tions of America were being repeated here too. Men and women building. Thousands of machines; hundreds of space-ships in what had been Trafalgar Square. Tents, camp fires, waving hands... No Cities; only ruins.

Same for France, Russia, Germany, vast parts of China, and numerous other countries. It was all very mysterious, strangely sinister, the visions of these shattered civilizations populated by men and women driving to perhaps a terrible end.

At last the young man turned the flyer around and headed back the way he had come.

"Tell me," Cassell said thoughtfully, after a long silence, "why do you build these machines? What's the idea?"

"We build them to play with," the man laughed, turning a little from his controls.

"But dammit, man, that's impossible! Don't you realize that you're toying around with incredibly complicated things? In the city I have noticed atomic force shells, heat-ray projectors, acid sprayers, energy screen devices, disrupter guns—all kinds of things for producing the most colossal havoc. And to cap it all, you are putting them inside machines that can fly through space or the air at thousands of miles an hour. *Why*?"

For just a second the young man frowned. "I never thought of it like that before," he admitted frankly; then with a beaming smile, "We don't mean it, of course. We don't want to harm anybody."

"I can believe that. That's what makes it so baffling. Why do something you don't want to do? Don't really care about?"

"Because we're told to. It's the Voice, you know. We can't ignore the Voice..."

Cassell gave a start. Moss leaned closer.

"What Voice?" Cassell asked very deliberately.

THE young man shrugged. "The one that talks so often, that tells us just what to do. We've got to obey; we can't help it. If we didn't obey I suppose we'd be hurt..."

"But where the devil does this Voice come from?" Moss demanded. "Gosh, if I could lay my hands on it I'd—"

"Nobody knows where it comes from," the young man broke in. "It just comes. We all hear it. We all obey. Children should obey, don't you think?"

"But you're *not* children!" Cassell yelped; then he immediately regretted the sharpness of his tone. The man visibly winced. With obvious hesitation he said: "But—but we are

children. You are too, aren't you . . . ? No; you are different. You're like — like Gods. You're not the Voice, are you?" he finished in awe.

Cassell shook his head patiently. "No, we've nothing to do with that. We're not Gods, either — but we're not children! Nor do we hear the Voice . . . Tell me, how long did the war last?"

"Fifteen years, I think. Nobody was left — not many, anyhow. And besides, at the end of it, nobody wanted to fight. We all made friends and started to do what the Voice commanded. We're still doing it. But you see, though we do what the Voice commands, we can't do anything wihou it — so of course we make our own little homes and live as best we can . . . "

"Suffering Cat, genius on tap!" Moss exclaimed, slamming his great fist on the chair back. "Turned on and off to make them work.When it isn't in force they're normal — or rather childlike. And they live that way."

"Yeah," Cassell nodded, then his keen eyes turned back to the young man. "What's you name, feller?"

"Grant Felbury."

"And your age and birthplace?"

"I don't know my age. I was born in New York, I think."

CASSELL made a brief note. For a long time he sat musing, then as Atlantic Island loomed up again in the setting sunshine he leaned forward quickly. "Land on that Island," he ordered briefly. "Think you can make it?"

Felbury nodded and brought the flyer down in an easy curve. The moment it stopped on the rocky tableland Cassell got to his feet and took down one of the several small disintegrating guns from the wall rack. He studied its mechanism for a moment, then turned to the surprised Moss.

"Be back in a moment," he said. "I'm — "

"Don't be long," Felbury broke in anxiously. "At sundown the Voice usually ceases to speak and when that happens I shan't be able to drive this any more. It's only while the Voice speaks in my mind that I can do it."

Cassell frowned for a moment, glanced at Moss' astounded face, then he turned sharply and opened the airlock. Through the window he was visible approaching the forbidding metal walls of the great, deserted penitentiary. He passed through the open gates . . . In ten minutes he returned, carrying a piece of gray metal in his hand.

"Aren't things baffling enough without your slicing off

chunks of metal and carting them around?" Moss demanded as he came back into the control room and closed the lock. "What's it for, anyway? A souvenir of twenty years in hell?"

Cassell smiled faintly. "Just a hunch," he shrugged. He hung the gun back in its rack. "O.K., Grant — let's go."

Again the machine took the air, and as the sun dipped into the calm ocean the vessel finally landed back almost in the place where it had started from.

"Only just in time," Grant smiled, as they climbed outside. "The Voice has ceased now . . . See you again. I'm going to have some fun with the others." He turned away, laughing, and for a long time the two friends stood looking after him as he headed towards the tents. Cassell still had his piece of metal in his hand.

"Well, what now?" Moss demanded at length. "Where do we go from here? Hunt down the Voice and poke the eye out of the scientist who's responsible?"

"What a child calls a Voice may cover a vast territory," Cassell replied pensively. "We're a long way from the solution yet." He turned and looked back at a massive, half-shattered store some little way behind them.

"That's going to be our headquarters from now on," he said. "It's large, and we won't be interrupted. We'll start in to equip it with whatever machinery or scientific tackle we may need — and from there, mingling with the people only for food or information — we'll start in to track this mystery down. I believe I've got the first clue, too . . ." He held up the chunk of metal.

"I think you're screwy," Moss said sourly.

"Maybe I am. We'll see. Also I want to know if there are any birth records left in the Public Statistics Building—what's left of it. I want to know all about Grant Felbury. I want the date of his birth, and his name isn't a common one by any means . . . The rest will be analysis, and finally maybe we'll find out what the hell the Voice is . . . Now let's go and look our headquarters over."

CHAPTER IV

The Eternal Children

CASSELL'S methods of tracking down the mystery were utterly complex to Moss. All he could do was, equip the great ground floor of the store they had taken over with whatever crude necessities of life he could find, and thereafter as-

sumed the role of housekeeper while Cassell prowled around the city putting together bits and pieces of the puzzle.

By degrees, he assembled pieces of equipment of an electrical nature, submitted the metal he'd brought from Atlantic Island to various tests. After that he proceeded to make notes — so many of them that at last Moss' impulsive, restless nature could stand it no longer.

"Say," he demanded one evening, as Cassell sat in the shadows before his equipment, "what exactly have you squeezed out of all this? When do we start fighting somebody or doing something? I'm going nuts for lack of some fast action."

"Sorry, but you'll stay housemaid till I'm through," Cassell answered briefly. "I'm going to piece matters together..." He hesitated, then asked with a wry smile, "Does it surprise you to know that Grant Felbury is eighty-seven years of age?"

Moss stared blankly. "What! That young chap who drove us around the earth? The one with the fluff on his chin?"

"The very same. What's more, several apparently young men and women whose names I've asked for and have afterwards managed to track down in the birth records, are clearly shown to be well over the age of sixty! There *are* younger ones, of course — thirty or thirty-five, but the great majority of these 'young' people should be on the verge of senility."

"But are you sure?" Moss demanded in amazement. "Maybe you've got the parents, not the children."

"No; they're the right people. I've checked up on that. And in so doing I've got a bit nearer the solution of the mystery... Think back on the strange behavior of the guards on Atlantic Island. Without any apparent warning they went all friendly, behaved as childishly as these folks in the city here — or those all over the world for that matter. But were the fellows who'd spent their lives in the dungeons like us at all childish? They were not! They were grim, bitter, and very much mature. In other words — normal."

"So what?"

"Just this. It proves, I believe, that whatever made people kiddish did not affect those who were buried nearly all the time in metal-bound dungeons. The guards were out in the open quite a lot — nearly all the time, in fact... " Cassell broke off and glanced at the piece of metal he had brought from the Island. "That piece of metal is from the wall of our cell," he resumed slowly. "It's *mijutin*, of course, and the walls of all the other cells were made of the same stuff. It was made impervious to all known methods of destruction — but not to the

ultra-modern disintegrator gun I used to carve out this chunk. Point is, however, that in being made so invulnerable, it also blocked all known radiations — yes, even cosmic waves, which will normally go through eight feet of lead. It deflects cosmic waves utterly, according to my tests."

"Wait a minute!" Moss breathed tensely. "You don't mean that some sort of radiation from space produced these effects on these war survivors, and that we prisoners escaped it because of the *mijutin* walls of our cells?"

Cassell nodded slowly. "Exactly what I do mean."

THEY sat looking at each other for a moment, then Moss began to scratch his bull neck. "Yeah, that's all right, but how the heck do eighty-year-old people skip around like kids? What's done it?"

Cassell got to his feet and moved to the glassless window. He nodded to the pale blue evening sky. "There's the explanation," he said slowly. "It occurred to me that the paleness of the sky and the one or two stars even in daytime might be caused by a thinning of the upper atmosphere. I asked myself what might cause that. I had dim suspicions, but I had to verify them by hunting up newspaper records. I dug some out of the vaults of the *New York Sun* offices and found several recordings on the progress of the war...

"Without boring you with the build-up, it is perfectly clear that the war fulfilled all the grave expectations of mankind in its viciousness — but outstanding of all facts is that bombs, incredible quantities of poison gases, incessant aerial explosions, consequent steady tumult of the air, combination of poison gases with the natural atmosphere, finally produced a remarkable effect. The upper layers of the atmosphere united in several places with the risen poison gases. Explosions took place time and time again — they're mentioned in the newspaper records as sheets of flame miles long. Out of that there could finally emerge only one thing, a tremendous weakening of the Heaviside Layer — the ionized shield around the earth, — and consequently a clearer view of the void beyond."

"And also an increased supply of radiations poured in from space?" Moss demanded eagerly. "Am I right?"

"Dead right. Radiations which we and the other prisoners, protected by *mijutin* metal, escaped..." Cassell meditated for a moment. "That accounts for the paleness of the sky and the daylight stars. It also means that the special radiations

responsible for evolution came to earth in ten-fold the quantity."

"But that would mean rapid old age — "

"That's what I thought, until I remembered that maturity, according to Mendel, is achieved in a human being at eighty years of age. After that the scale swings the other way and, if death could only be somehow circumvented, the body would start to rebuild itself by slow degrees — even as universes rebuild from the shattered remains of their earlier existence. If you doubt the idea, consider second childhood — and when you do, remember that ordinary second childhood has all the limitations of a natural evolution and a normal atmosphere. With a changed atmosphere — as it is now— and fuller radiations, age strides rapidly into second childhood and life starts all over again.

"Remember too that in the days of the Biblical Ancients, the atmosphere was probably pretty similar to what it is now... Remember that Moses, it is recorded, was a young man at one hundred and forty! Many of the Ancients were eternal, only vanished when their minds mastered their bodies — but that's beside the point. What we know is that these people should ordinarily be old, but thanks to evolutive radiation changes, they've attained maturity and at full speed have recaptured youth once more. That's why Grant couldn't give his age. He's probably forgotten his earlier life entirely, like the rest of 'em."

"Then — then at that rate they may never die?" Moss demanded.

"Definitely they won't. They'll rejuvenate each time — which is life as it should be. Eternal — happy — enjoyable. Only the slow thickening of the atmosphere once more with the course of centuries will produce the old conditions."

"And we haven't come under this influence?"

"Not yet, but we shall do so as time passes. These people have had years under the influence. The war ended ten years ago because they *had* come under the influence. We've only had a week or two."

Moss stroked his chin, then shrugged. "Well, I guess that clears up the childishness all right — but it doesn't clear up the mystery of the Voice that Grant was rambling about. I got the idea some scientist might have buried himself somewhere around and was using vibrations or something. How's that?"

"Miles out," Cassell sighed. "I'm on with the mystery right now. That Voice is nowhere on earth; I'm sure of that. Remem-

ber one dominant factor — If the atmosphere thinned enough to permit evolution radiations coming in, it would also permit *other* radiations to pass through. That Voice Grant referred to is, I think, somewhere in outer space, and because of our thinned ionized layer, it easily penetrates to Earth's surface. Radio may locate it; I hope so, anyway, though how these folks pick it up I've *yet* to figure."

Cassell stopped talking, meditated for a long time while Moss still rubbed his chin . . . then at last Cassell turned to his equipment and began a laborious building up of components . . .

FOR DAYS, Cassell labored on his radio equipment, at last had fashioned a powerful short-wave receiver — but the results were hopeless. He got nothing out of space save a continuous crackle and hiss of static and solar interference. Certainly there was no Voice . . .

After the fourth attempt, he sat in bitter silence before the instrument. Outside, darkness had fallen. Stars such as Earth had been previously denied were strewn in the calm, clear sky. Faintly on the soft wind the laughs and cries of the playing Eternals floated through the glassless windows.

"Nothing doing?" asked Moss disappointedly, hands in pockets.

"Nope . . ." Cassell's brooding eyes stared out onto the distant lights of the camp fires. "Listen how they laugh and play," he murmured. "Children, and we struggle and toil to understand what controls them because we are *not* children . . ." He paused and mused over that, said it again, ". . . because we are not children. Lord! I wonder!" he cried hoarsely.

"What?"

He swung round. "The child mind is receptive to ideas which a mature mind cannot receive. Think of the well-known innocence of children, the simple way they accept things, and then — Their minds are more receptive than ours! That's it! It is not an actual Voice they hear, not a radio communication. That was *our* notion of the business. What they are getting is *mind* communication — telepathic thought-waves out of space which their clear, untrammeled minds pick up naturally. Besides, their minds are extra clear because of their fast evolution which has eradicated all old hide-bound beliefs, which normally blind the brain to receptivity."

"Thought waves!" Moss gasped. "But who would send thought waves to earth, anyway?"

"Only one person would conceivably do it — the man we owe so much. Maralok, the Venusian!"

"You mean that dirty swine is back of all this — "

"It's a shot in the dark, but I believe I may be right. If it *is* Maralok driving these people to make fresh war plans . . . " Cassell's eyes narrowed vengefully; then suddenly he swung around. "You carry on as usual," he said shortly. "I'm going to start on another track. First call is the observatory in what was Central Park. Still standing. I want to take a look at venus, see if anything unusual's in sight."

He went out at a run. It was two hours before he was back, grimly smiling.

"Nice work," he murmured. "The clearer atmosphere on Earth has helped things a lot. I used the X-ray analysis plates and they penetrated the Venusian cloud belt fairly effectually. The Venusian cities are going full blast . . . I'm pretty certain Maralok's mixed up in all this somewhere. Rather queer things going on on Mars, too. The airlet valves to their underground cities, which we used to call canals, remember, are operating at top speed. Activity there too; but I'll still back my bottom dollar on those Venusian devils, though why Maralok should want to drive a collection of people, whom he must surely know are childish, into yet another war, has me licked.

"However, I've now got my next move to make. I'm going to get Grant Felbury to come here and submit to a scientific test. I'm going to devise a brain-reader, such as our scientists used in 1950 for reading the minds of spies — outgrowth of the old lie detector, if you recollect? They tried using one on us at the trial, but we gave away nothing.

"The instrument will relay whatever thoughts pass through Grant's mind to transformers. In turn, those vibrations will be transplanted to steel pick-up tapes, then I can listen in to those vibrations myself and interpret them with a radio device. Simple enough — and Grant's mind will be as clear as a bell, because he's nothing to hide. O.K. — you can give me a hand to start building . . . Come on."

CHAPTER V

A New Order

SO THE work began, Cassell using all his skill and calling into being knowledge that had been enforcedly shelved in his mind for twenty years — but by degrees he built his mind-reader, a complicated contrivance of wires, tubes and magnets.

When at last he was satisfied, he summoned Grant Felbury. Unhesitatingly, the young-old man agreed to the suggestions put to him, took up his new quarters in the department store and only departed each day to obey the orders of the Voice. But those orders were noted down by Cassell.

By degrees, writing down every word given back to him over the recording tapes, he began to build up data — through days, through weeks, as the work of the men and women went on. Moss noticed that his friend's face was usually either astounded or bitter by turns, then at last he came to the point where he decided to unburden himself.

"Incredible though it sounds," he said slowly, "these thought-vibrations are not intended for the Earth at tll! Yes, you can stare! They are intended for *Mars*, not Earth — and as I see it, the Venusians, with Maralok undoubtedly somewhere in the background, are using electromagnetic waves for the purpose of transmitting amplified thought commands, which of course interpret naturally into any language. Those electromagnetic waves penetrate through Venus' dense atmosphere and thereafter spread out in ever-widening circles. They also penetrate the thin air of Mars with perfect ease, and it seems logical to assume that the Martian brain, being pretty advanced, is perfectly receptive to these thought commands... Now, normally the Earth would not get a vestige of those waves because the Heaviside Layer would deflect them — but because it is so badly weakened, and because these people have childish, receptive minds, the orders are being obeyed here as well!"

"Gosh!" Moss whistled. "The possibilities that may — "

"Let's get it straight," Cassell broke in, musing. "From all the notes I've made, I can arrive at only one possible solution. Before Maralok came to Earth, he had already defeated the people of Mars in their underground cities. That planet automatically became a vassal world to Venus, populated by beings utterly crushed. Maralok then came to Earth and started a world war, knowing from our piled up armaments that out of the carnage there could only emerge a race of demoralized savages. How, afterwards, to conquer those savages? By sheer weight of arms, against which they would be quite defenseless because their own materials had been used up...

"But Venus alone might not have enough armaments, already depleted from the Martian conquest. Therefore the Venusians decided to force the Martians, against their will, to build a supplementary armada... But in so doing, Maralok

has defeated himself! He evidently has no idea of what has happened to our atmosphere, no idea that two men like us still have normal knowledge, no idea that instead of defenseless savages there is a race of people building up a vast armada as fast as he gives the orders..."

Moss gripped his friend's arm. His eyes were shining.

"Man alive, do you realize what this means?" he yelled. "We can avenge ourselves. Avenge the war—"

"Yes, I know." Cassell's face was as set as steel. "We shall strike first! The people here look on us as something Godlike; they'll do what we tell them. I've got to get the rest of the world's peoples to see reason..."

"That's my job!" Moss insisted. "I'm an expert in war organization, remember. I'll lead the mightiest battle fleet any Venusian ever saw! By God—yes!"

THEREAFTER it was Moss who became the dynamo of energy, using at last his long pent-up desires for fast action. He went into the midst of the people with all the flourish of an orator. By words and promises he explained the situation. He doubted if half the men understood what he meant, but they did at last express a ready willingness to do whatever he desired—to strike at this mysterious presence who called itself the Voice, who was oppressing them.

Moss could not pause at this stage. With Grant Felbury as his pilot, he started a world tour, explained by the use of Cassell's brain-transferer to people of other lands exactly what was afoot. The brain-reader did away with the difficulty of foreign languages.

Then there were more difficulties, even when he had gained the co-operation of all the childlike peoples of the world. He had to make sure that the men who would be pilots would not lose the knowledge they possessed when the Voice was out of commission. The only way to do that was to spend hours in instruction, once he had himself learned the intricacies of space-ship control. Odd indeed to teach people how to control a vessel which they handled flawlessly when under telepathic orders.

But there it was. Moss worked with superhuman determination, instructed gun units, pilots, assistant-pilots, rocket fuel men, generally built up through the ensuing weeks an army that he felt he could rely on—while those he had not singled out went on with the Voice's orders and continued building machinery and ships.

Not that Cassell was idle by any means. It was his task to make a second mind-reader and set out for Mars in an effort to get the Martians to understand what was controlling them and obtain their aid. Against two fleets, nothing Venus could provide could possibly stand. So, with Grant as his pilot, Cassell finally set out — was away for nearly five weeks.

Moss, in fact, was getting worried as to his friend's safety. His own work was completed and he itched for final results. For days he mooned around, waiting — then at last towards sunset one evening he glimpsed the lone returning flyer far out over the Atlantic. Within minutes it settled.

Cassell emerged from the airlock, still looking a bit awed by his first experience of space. He gripped his friend's big hand warmly. Silently they walked together through the massed rows of space-ships into the department store, had a meal while the gathered men and women around moved themselves without encroaching.

"It's all set," Cassell said finally. "Since I was a lone flyer to Mars, no Venusian astronomer spotted me, I guess. I had a bit of a job on, but finally I got down to the underground Martian cities, had an interview with the ruler. They're queer people, but a mighty fine race all the same. Their armaments were practically nil when Maralok invaded them and took over. With the mind-reader I managed to explain things, and they were pretty astounded to find that their building was under orders. There was no hesitation in their agreeing to ignore the Voice from now on. Unlike Earthlings, their higher mentality has made it possible for them to retain plenty of knowledge; they're not by any means childish . . . Anyway, they've agreed to join our fleet with theirs the moment we are sighted half-way to Venus. And then . . . "

"Oh, boy!" Moss breathed, rubbing his hands. "And am I ready! I've got every man fixed so he knows exactly what to do . . . We start at dawn."

Cassell nodded. "O.K. I'll turn in and get some sleep. One gets precious little in space . . . "

DAWN. Every man ready. Short wave radio fixed by Moss between ships. No detail overlooked.

Women seemed to be everywhere to see the armada off. Many of them were throwing the wild flowers that grew in profusion in the streets.

Cassell and Moss both gave a final speech, then together with Grant they stepped into their machine at the head of the

three thousand fliers. Without a pause, the moment Grant was settled at the control board, Moss snapped on the radio microphone; his order for departure passed the whole length of the armada.

One by one, the ships rose with the easy grace of birds, exhaust tubes flaring steadily. Up into the pale, rosy sky . . . Into the remoter heights . . . Out of sight of those below.

With a speed that seemed almost incredible, occasioned entirely by the terrific blasts of atomic power, the ships tore through infinity, out beyond the moon's orbit — out into the emptiness that Cassell had already seen. Even so, the wonder of it gripped him again — and Moss. For a moment, the magnitude and incomprehensibility of space made them both forget the errand on which they had come.

Then at length Moss took a grip on himself again, giving orders. For endless hours, the ship flew onwards, then as they finally crossed the half way line between Earth and Venus, there spewed from the distant red ball of Mars a cloud of silver gray — more space — machines, thousands upon thousands of them, equipped as were the Earth machines, in every detail.

By slow degrees, as Venus loomed larger in the cosmos, the Martian fleet caught up . . . Through the portholes, Moss caught an occasional glimpse of the men of the red planet — curious, fur covered beings they seemed to be, with big pathetic eyes and large dome cases. But their physical structure did not matter. They were united with Earthlings in a common cause — Vengeance!

Venus became even larger, shining silver white with her cloud canopy. Then she filled all space. The vast armada altered position to sweep horizontally to the Venusian surface, plunged below the dense cloud belts . . .

Both Cassell and Moss caught their breath at the vision below.

In the main, the planet was steamy and hot, ridged with titanic mountains, but wherever there was solid land were squat, powerful cities breathing the very soul of scientific power. Everything was orderly, well planned. Here and there Venusians were moving along the specially designed tracks, but as they caught sight of the first of the ships, they started to run.

"We've caught them by surprise all right," Moss breathed, hands clamped on the window frame. "That's just what we wanted. They showed neither Mars nor Earth any quarter, and by Heaven they'll get none from us . . . "

He swung around, snapped on the microphone.

"Release all weapons on all cities!" he barked out. "Leave no building standing and no Venusian alive!"

Then he swung back to the deadliest of the ship's instruments — the disrupter, wheeled it around so that the sights were in line with the specially devised opening in the vessel's casing.

"O.K.," he snapped out to Grant. "Follow out Cassel's orders from now on. He'll direct the course..."

He closed the switches and the power leapt into the instrument. As his merciless eyes glared through the sights at the first of the great buildings below, his mind went back suddenly over twenty years on a stormbound island, of a world convulsed with a war that mankind, left to itself, could have diverted. Millions of lives drowned in blood... To appease Maralok!

HE FIRED the gun. His action was enough — the fleet followed suit. The Martians, unable to understand his orders over the radio did at least understand this. They struck too — without question or mercy. The air became thick with blast rays; vicious acid sprayers rained corrosives down on the now thousands of Venusians scurrying in the streets below.

Too late they forced their own fleet into action. Gallantly though their numbers fought, there were not enough of them to combat the numbers that their own avarice had literally brought into being.

Time and again, Earth and Martian ships hurtled back and forth like silver shuttles over the city, tearing out huge pieces of the buildings with their weapons, blasting the very ground from under the feet of the would-be conquerors, burying them under upbelched tons of rock and earth. Smoke rose in clouds — smoke, dust and debris as entire buildings lifted from their foundations and then rained back on the decimated occupants.

Without a single pause, the twin armadas raced time and time again around the Venusian globe, omitted no city, spared no single spot of habitated land. They exhausted their acids and supplies of bombs; they burned out their gun firing points, they seized up their smoking hot disrupters... But by that time, the Venusian landscape was a haze of drifting smoke from end to end.

There was nothing — nothing but a shambles lying in steamy, sickly heat...

Weak from strain, perspiration rolling down his face, Moss straightened his aching back. Wearily he gave the signal.

"Enough! Return home! Our work's finished..."

He made a motion to Grant at the switchboard — then in a sudden rush the whole reaction caught up on him. He collapsed his length on the floor...

He returned to consciousness to find Cassell bending over him, discovered that he was lying on the emergency bed.

Cassell smiled faintly. "You're all right now," he murmured. "Just the strain, that's all. But boy, did you wipe 'em up! I don't think a single stone is left lying on another on all Venus... We're on the way back now — and from now on it's got to be our job to reconstruct. My job, anyway."

"You can have it," Moss said, sitting up and rubbing his head. "I've done my whack — but if you want anything military, call on me. Incidentally, what are you going to do when we arrive back? How do we finish up? Live like children..."

"No," Cassell shook his head. "You and I are adults, old man — and so are several of the men we have trained. In time though, we'll all be childish unless we take measures to stop it. We can do it by wearing light helmets of *mijutin*. If we always wear them, we will never slip into childhood. The others can choose... Maybe it's only fair they have childishness again.

"With the knowledge that we have we can rebuild the world anew. The people will obey us; we've become endeared as Gods to their hearts. We'll eliminate all causes of discord and create a perfect planet. We'll make a deal with Mars too, and get their assistance. Mars and Earth will go hand in hand after this...

"But for this ideal, there will be a price," Cassell finished slowly. "To become the masters we shall have to forfeit a chance of childish, carefree abandon and, more important, the gift of eternal life... But if we live our life span and leave a happy world for the others, does it matter so much? They may learn in time, for the atmosphere will thicken until there will be no more Eternals. Then they must choose for themselves, either use or destroy what we shall build up.

"For us — either peace and progress, or stagnation and eternity. Which?"

"You know me," Moss grinned. "Life eternal hasn't got much fascination for me, anyway. I'm with you in building a vast new empire..."

He held out his powerful hand. With a smile, Cassell seized it, gripped it tightly. At the control board Grant Felbury started to whistle his favorite nursery rhyme...

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